

[Julien Philip Benjamin]

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Julien Philip Benjamin

Construction and Drainage

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Jacksonville, florida.

Rose Shepherd, Writer.

JULIEN PHILIP BENJAMIN

When asked about his relationship to the famous Judah Philip Benjamin, member of Jefferson Davis' Cabinet of the Confederacy, Mr. Benjamin said:

"About third or fourth cousins - a little too far back to brag about - but it is true that his great-grandfather and my great-great grandfather were brothers. My great-great grandfather was a Judah Benjamin, and there have always been Judahs, Juliens, and Philips among the boys of the family. Our forbears were German Jews.

"Judah P. Benjamin's father went to England and from there to the West Indies. His name was Philip Benjamin, born about 1782. His mother was Rebecca de Mondes Benjamin, and they emigrated from London, England, to St. Thomas, British West Indies, in 1808, shortly after their marriage. Judah was born there August 6, 1811, in the town of St. Croix.

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There was an older brother, Charles, and two sisters younger. The Benjamins moved to the United States, where they had originally intended to go, about 1818, landing at Wilmington, N. C. Young Judah attended school for three years at Fayetteville, North Carolina, later attending Yale University, [182501827?], which he left at the end of the three year period without taking a degree. The family removed to Charleston, south Carolina, and after many vicissitudes, during which the father died, settled in New Orleans, where Judah P. had established himself 2 as a lawyer, booming associated with Thomas Slidell, who later became Chief Justice of Louisiana. His older sister married Abraham Levy in 1826, and his younger sister became the mother of Julins Kruttschnitt, the railroad manager and promoter, who was born in New Orleans in 1854. His own mother, Rebecca de Mondes Benjamin, died there in 1847.

“You see I am interested in history, and a few years ago I made a special trip to New Orleans to get more light on Judah P. Benjamin's life in Louisiana, but there is not much to be learned now outside of what has been originally published in Pierce Butler's ‘Biography of Judah P. Benjamin’ and Peter Wiernik's ‘History of the Jews in America.’

“It seems from investigation that Judah had a very bad habit of tearing up all personal letters and comments, so that very few personal documents have ever been available.

“My son has been most anxious to consult original family records in Germany, with a view to building a ‘family tree’ - so to speak, but conditions there for the past several years have made that an utter impossibility, and now we may never be able to learn anything from that end.

“My father, Lazarus Benjamin, came to the United States in the latter 1850's. When people emigrated in those days, they usually had family connections to whom they could appeal for counsel and assistance until they became established in their new affiliations. So my father went first to Charleston where he had an older brother, Simon. Two other brothers came with him from Germany - Solomon and Ben, who 3 located in the South Carolina

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city, but my father, more of a pioneering spirit, came to Florida, and located in Ocala in 1860, just shortly before the War between the States.

“He had become an American citizen and when the south [seceded?], he promptly enlisted in the Confederate army, serving throughout the war.

“The only letter I ever saw from Judah P. Benjamin was one directed to my father's brother, regarding his discharge from the Confederate forces. It was in our possession for some time, but I loaned it to my cousin in Atlanta, who is a direct descendant of the paroled soldier, and have not seen it for some years. I do not know if the letter could be located now.

“My father had a continuous residence in Florida from the time he located in Ocala until he died in the late 1880's. I remember hearing him say that on his return from the war he [?] all night at Joe Beckham's house in Waldo. Waldo had been a railroad center and quite a town before the war. Mr. Beckham operated a store there.

“On returning to Ocala he engaged in the trucking business, and Geo. Munger who used to clerk here in the Duval County Courthouse told me he checked freight delivered by father to the boat line running from [Palatka?] to Silver Springs, his first job as a young man just starting out on his own.

“My father built the first artificial ice plant in Ocala in 1880, and later installed two more in that section of Florida.

“My brother, Roy, and I were both born in Ocala. We 4 were educated in Atlanta, Georgia.

“My first trip to Jacksonville was by train in 1888. I was just a little boy and had on a new pair of shoes, of which I was very proud, so I was delighted when we got off at the depot - the railroad station at Hogan's Creek - to see the plank walk that ran up to Bay Street.

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There were very few sidewalks here at that time, and I did not relish the idea of ploughing through the deep sand and spoiling my brand new shoes.

"I located here permanently in 1907, but right after the fire of 1901 I did considerable work in the restoration of the West Building, the Dyal-Upchurch Building, and the Gardner Building where the Cohen Brothers Store was. These buildings were left standing, but had been badly damaged.

"When I established my home here, Jacksonville had a population of about 30,000. The fire was a blessing in disguise, as it really put the town on its feet, it started taking steps forward and has never stopped. And now we have the naval air base finally assured; very few people now realize the magnitude of this project and the asset it will be to Jacksonville.

"While we are talking about disasters, the best thing that ever happened to the State of Florida generally was the big freeze of 1895. It took attention away from the 'all-eggs-in-one-basket' crop of citrus, and started the development of the truck and small fruit business, providing an all the year round income instead of depending on the one crop.

"I remember father telling me when he first came to Ocala that a great deal of long staple cotton - the Sea Island variety - was raised in that section. There were 5 big plantations, and the picking and ginning and shipping of cotton in Alachua and Marion counties was a rather momentous business. I am glad to see the revival of planting of Sea Island cotton again in those sections, since the agricultural experts have conquered the boll weevil.

"Speaking of history, a friend of mine sent me from Connecticut a book called 'the New Florida', published in 1887, a very good word picture of Florida in those days, and dwells particularly on the treatment of negroes in the state, the author, whose name I do not now recall, stating the black race was well treated, considered in most cases family responsibilities, and at no time was there visible any such distressing incidents as dwelt

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upon by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her Uncle Tom's Cabin. I shall be glad to bring, it down to my office where you can get it when you come back again.

“Another recent interesting article - just published in the May issue of The Military Engineer - one of the leading engineering publications, is a seven days diary of a Confederate Soldier on his journey from Petersburg, Virginia, to the surrender of Lee's Army at Appomattox in 1865. The morale of the rugged, weary, starving soldiers, had not been broken or undermined and they were still willing to carry on.

“I have not family papers or documents of importance, but do possess a muster roll, an original manuscript written in a most legible hand [xxx] by my mother's brother, member of a Charleston, South Carolina, regiment. The Captain's name was Fox, and every name on the roll is Irish. The interesting part is that the record was kept up to date - it tells the full name of each enlisted soldier, where he was from, and promotions; also what became of him, if he was paroled, on sick leave, killed or captured. My mother gave it to me years ago.

“Fifteen years ago I spoke at a banquet in Charleston, referring to this muster roll, and Captain Fox was still living, being present at the dinner. They wanted me to give it to them for the Charleston Museum, but I did not, although I suppose I should, as it is really South Carolina history and there is where it belongs.

“What has been my most interesting job? Well, I would not be able to say, offhand. They are all interesting, some present difficult problems, but for the most part they are just routine.

“My son, who is also an engineer, expects to have considerable work in the establishing of the new Naval Air Base. No doubt this will be most interesting, since this is in line with newer subjects and most modern construction methods.

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"Returning again to historical matters, our family has always understood that Senator David Yulee and Judah P. Benjamin were cousins through some relationship of their mothers. Such was born on St. Thomas, Island, in the West Indies - Yulee in 1810 and Benjamin in 1811 - and it is mere conjecture as to where the kinship of the two women drew the respective families together on this British possession at about the same time. The paternal Yulee was racially Portuguese, whose father, through participation in Moroccan affairs in an official capacity had been designated a Prince of the empire. The overthrow of the dynasty for [?] the Yulees to flee from Morocco to England 7 and when [in?] the course of time their son was forced to go into business, the mother insisted on his assuming her family name of Levy to avoid the loss of caste of a Prince's son engaged in common trade. So, when David came along, he was known first as David Levy, later assuming his correct family name of Yulee.

"The Benjamins, so far as we have been able to investigate, have always been Benjamins - generation after generation - but the switch of the Yulees to Levy and back again to Yulee has resulted in a slight 'bend' in the family tree.

"But, as I said before, my son is an indefatigable researched and ardent Southerner - he always wants to fight the war of the Confederacy all over again - and I am in hopes he will have the opportunity at some time to get the full relationship of the two families straightened out."